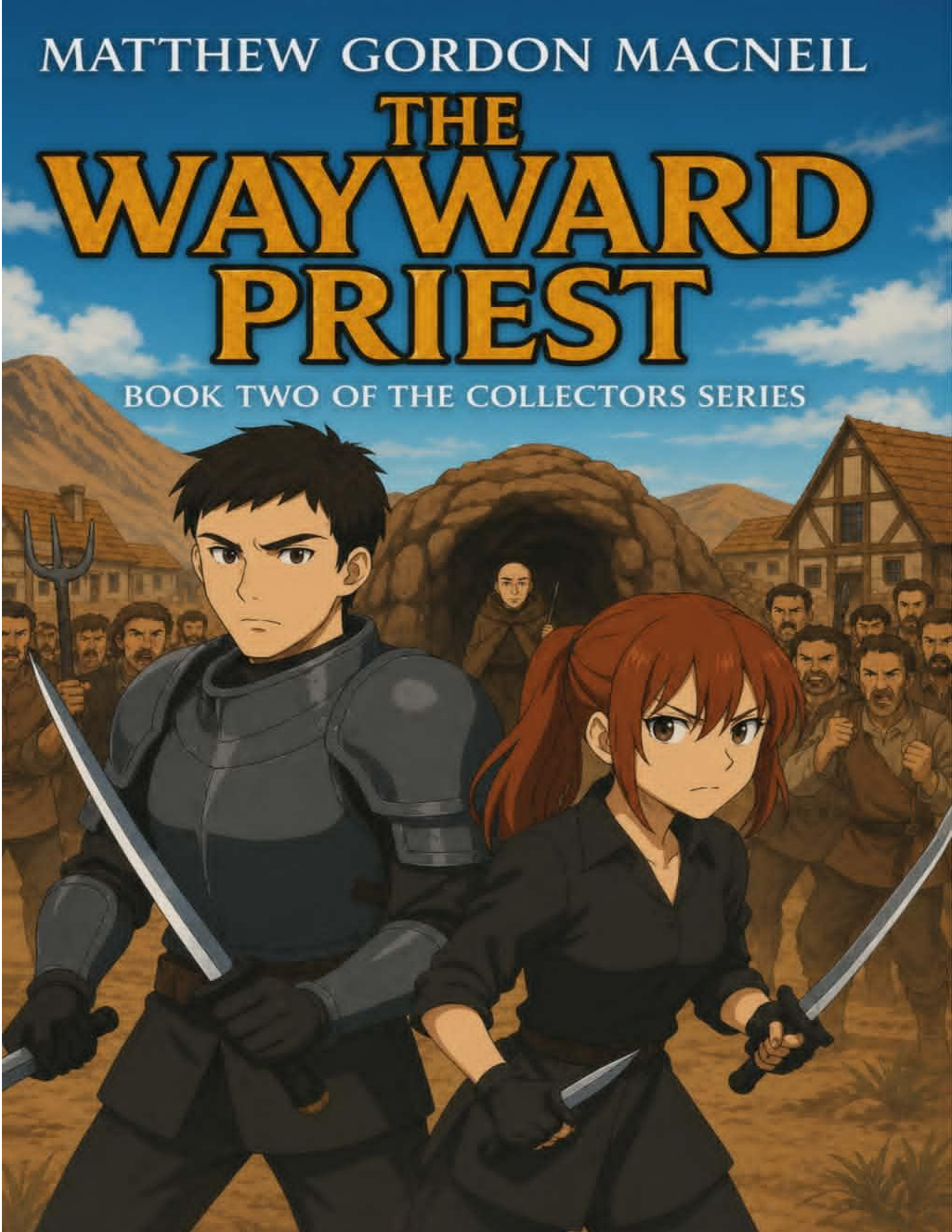
MATTHEW GORDON MACNEIL

THE WAYWARD PRIEST

BOOK TWO OF THE COLLECTORS SERIES



The Wayward Priest: Book Two of the Collectors Series

Matthew Gordon MacNeil

Chapter 1

For a priest, he wasn't that religious.

Or, rather, he wasn't what most people expected when they thought of a religious person.

But Zander Kerrow wasn't fazed by it, he long ago gave up caring what others thought about him or the world at large.

He believed in the Gods. He prayed to them and talked to them when he needed to vent or get something off his chest.

But he didn't believe the Gods hovered over people, waiting on their every beck and call, they weren't there to be gift givers.

And this is what set him apart from other priests in the Order of Kelante, the Kingdom of Sarnia's largest religious organization, who thrived on telling people the Gods were their friends, would listen and grant wishes.

He had no time for such nonsense, he had people to attend to and look after, not give false hope to desperate souls.

"You daydreaming again Zane?"

His friend Kea asked as she filied away registration documents with the local church, closing and shutting drawers rapidly.

Zander, staring out a window blankly, blinked and smiled sheepishly.

"No, just thinking of people."

"People?"

"Yup. Humanity. Our wonderful species."

"Your misanthropic nature is showing again."

"is it?"

The air conditioner made their office cool in the summers, but Zane always got too cold and right now he was getting close to freezing.

"Why were you thinking of people?"

Kea Auccoin, a first year theology student at Kelante college, was half Dark Elf, her skin ashen grey, eyes purple, and her long black hair worn loose, braided on the ends.

Her father, Deacon Morin Auccoin, was human and Head of the church in her hometown of Meadow Garden. Her mother, Veronica Teran, was a priestess. With both parents dedicated to the Order, it was only natural she'd follow in their footsteps.

"Something to do."

He said smirking, not wanting to reveal what he was truly dwelling on in regards to people.

Kea closed the last drawer and flopped down on her chair, fiddling with a quill pen.

"Something to do he says. You know, if you spent more time actually helping me with these papers instead of thinking, we'd be home a lot faster."

"I think we'd still be here. Just with less of a mountain."

He said, gesturing at the piles of paperwork they had left to do.

As a senior priest with Kelante Zander had a sort of office job, half administrator, half counsellor to the people. The latter part he enjoyed a lot.

The paperwork?

He hated it with a passion.

He envied Kea in a way. This office job was just part time for her until she finished her degree in three years, then she'd be going back to Meadow Garden.

For him this was his life, stuck in a bland white walled room nine hours day, with an hour break at lunch.

What's more, he was only twenty seven, and here he was stuck in an office most of his day.

Still, despite his apparent lack of interest in what he did, he loved helping people and bringing them spiritual comfort, so in many ways putting up with paperwork was worth it.

Kea cracked her knuckles and stuffed her hands inside her robes, starting to feel the chill.

"Maybe we should ask Vance to fix the AC?"

She asked, her ears drooping.

"Knowing Vance he'd just shrug, say everything's fine, and huff when prodded. Better to see if one of the Mages can fix it later."

"Using Magic for such a mundane thing."

Kea gave her best 'scolding' expression.

"Yeah, imagine that,"

Zander laughed,

"Using your inherent abilities to do mundane tasks instead of always saving the world. Crazy ain't it?"

Afternoons were always like this, especially when it reached closing time. They passed jokes between them, swapped stories, anything to make time go faster.

The last of Zander's clients, Mr. Gorlow, never showed up so he was left with nothing to do besides paperwork and staring out windows.

Tomorrow would be different though, for tomorrow he made his rounds in the lower town, helping the poor families who needed medical care or help with food.

One family in particular, a Gnome Clan who recently migrated from the Crystal Isles, was on his mind the last few days as

their patriarch passed away last week, leaving a wife and three small children to fend for themselves.

The mother was a proud woman who didn't take charity well, but he needed to convince her that pride, in this instance in any case, wasn't good for the welfare of her children.

"Did you get those assignments done?"

He asked, referring to two essays, one on Kelante's origins, and another on Shamanism in ancient Sarnian society.

Kea shook her head, frowning.

"I'm a huge procrastinator."

"I want to be 'that person' and scold you but....Gods know I'm no better. I'll be sitting there, staring at this,"

He tapped a piece of paper,

"Or off into space, not having the focus. The best advice I can give is, simply, do it."

"Do it?"

"Yeah. Stop messing around and just do the work. It may feel like pulling teeth at first, but you'll get into the meat of things soon enough and they'll be done."

Kea gave a mock salute, but she said she'd do her best and with that Zane was happy.

They spent the rest of the afternoon filling the last of their paperwork and once the bell went off to signal the end of the day, they wished each other a goodnight and went their separate ways.

Night time always brought out the most rowdy and obnoxious of the capital's citizens. They crowded around the streets, laughing, carrying on, making fools of themselves and causing terrible noise.

Zander always managed to walk past them without incident. He assumed it was due to his robes, they gave him away as a priest and one thing partiers didn't want was to hear a lecture from a clergyman.

Not that Zander was much inclined to do so, he didn't care one way or the other if people partied, got shit faced or splurged on drinks until their pockets were empty. It was just how people were.

His only concern lay in them getting home safely afterwards, but he couldn't hover around them all night, so he nodded at the few who waved at him, told them to be mindful of their surroundings, and walked on.

He lived in modest accommodations, a small house situated next to an armory shop owned by the church. As part of his

assignment Zane was allowed to live there rent free, Gods knew he was grateful for that.

Opening the door a rush of light musk hit him, tickling his nose. He barely noticed it anymore, long ago accustomed to the smell.

His cat, Polly, came bounding down from upstairs when she heard the door open, flopping down at his feet, belly exposed for a good rub down.

"Glad someone seems to have had a good day."

He smiled, bending down and tickling her stomach. He'd always heard cats didn't like having their bellies rubbed, and he wanted to know what fool made such an absolute statement, as it was clearly false.

Sure, some cats didn't like it, but some did, Polly being the perfect example.

Mostly grey with a white chin and neck, Polly had been his pet for ten years now, coming to him as a skinny kitten. Now she was a plump and furry 'old lady' as he teased her sometimes.

Rubbing behind Polly's ears Zander stood and stepped over her, walking into the small white tiled kitchen to give her some food and fix something for himself.

Shredding up fish he dropped some into her bowl and took

the rest to make a sandwich, pouring a glass of water to wash it down with.

He sat on the couch....or what passed for his couch, a round, almost chair like cushion a fellow member of the Order gave him, and ate his meal, mind wandering to the Gnome family as he chewed.

Beyond bringing them food and drink, what else could he do? Offer words of guidance of course, counsel the mother, play with the children.

But what impactful thing could he do? How could he make their lives better?

These were the questions that most bothered him. He helped people and he loved it, but at the same time this help wasn't long lasting in most cases. The people went without food again, went without a helping hand again, faced hardships alone.

Kea called him a misanthrope, a hater of humans, and in a sense it was correct.

He hated human nature. Hated how selfish, harmful, hurtful, and hateful humans could, and almost always, were. All hidden underneath the superficial politeness of everyday society which most took for granted as genuine.

But he wasn't a true misanthrope. He cared about human

suffering, it drove him mad if he let himself dwell on it too long.

Suffering, seeing others hurt, watching people inflict phyiscal and emotion pain on each other, it made him sick and weighed on his mind.

He cared too much, as Kea also liked to say. His two halves contradicted one another he realized, but it was just who he was and he accepted it long ago.

Taking Polly upstairs with him Zander fixed up his bed and soon found himself fast asleep, unable to keep his eyes open.

Chapter 2

Known to the upper classes as the Ghetto, its proper name was Lower Town. It was home to the poor and homeless, the latter group forced to reside here as the posh and prim didn't think it 'in good taste' to allow them to be seen anywhere else in the capital.

Of course, these same people went to Church everyday Holy Day, exclaimed how much they loved the Gods and followed their commandments, conveniently forgetting the first

commandment of the Head God, the Blue Dragon Tannavar, was to "Love and care for each other."

Hypocrites. But it was nothing new to human behavior, Zander reminded himself as he walked through the streets of the slums, passing by cragged face men, women who's bodies were so thin they were almost transparent.

Kids ran around, laughing and giggling, oblivious to just how desperate and harsh their situations were, which was a blissing in Zander's opinion. Better to let them enjoy their lives while they could, adulthood would spring on them soon enough with its heart aches and cruelties.

The Gnome family lived in a small apartment above an old mead store, cramped for space and with little food.

Zander carried a food parcel under one arm, packed with fruit, vegetables, meats, and some canned beans Kea helped collect. It wasn't much but for now it was all he could get.

He knocked on the door and waited.

It took five minutes before someone answered, and it wasn't the mother like he expected.

It was an officer with the police force, his face grave.

The man looked Zander over.

"Do you have business here Father?"

"I do,"

He tapped the food parcel,

"I've come to deliver Mrs. Korin this...Did something happen officer?"

"Unfortunately so."

He stepped aside and gestured for Zander to come inside, not unusual as most priests were trained in Magic and could use it to detect things unseen by the naked eye, proving valuable in investigations.

Preparing himself Zander went in, nose immediately hit by the overwhelming smell of blood and bodily waste. He dropped the box and started gagging.

"What...."

He put a hand over his mouth.

"Entire family dead. Slaughtered while they slept. The mother was tortured before she died. That's the smell."

The officer acted like he was describing just another day of desk work, nonchalant and strolling through the apartment with ease.

It took great effort for Zander to follow the man, not wanting to see the horrors which awaited in the rooms, but he forced

himself to go.

The officer opened up the mother's room first and stepped in, standing by the bed.

As he walked in Zander tried to brace himself, but failed.

Mrs. Korin's chest was engraved with strange symbols which resembled crude pictures of animals. One, near her left breast, was a bear. Another, in the center, was a wolf.

Symbols of Artos and Morrigan, the God of War and the God of the Hunt and animals respectively.

Hardly anyone used these symbols anymore, Zander thought, they fell out of use when the Church was organized and Shamanistic rituals were abandoned.

The only people he knew who still practiced the animal symbols were the Aledranni, a human tribe in the west who hardly ever left their tribal lands.

It was unlikely the person who did this was one of them.

"Were all the children..."

Zander asked.

"As I said sir, the mother and children were killed. None survived as horrible as it is. The worst part, aside from the obvious, is we have no evidence to point us in the direction of

the murderer."

Zander swallowed.

Seeing their mother was enough, he wouldn't put himself through a second round of nightmares.

Instead, as much as he regretted it afterwards, he ran out, barely able to hold down his breakfast.

Heading back home he sat down and went over what he'd just seen, trying to come to terms with how something so cruel could happen to a family doing no harm to anyone.

The Ghetto was a dangerous place, everyone knew that, but even it had rules and regulations between criminals and gangs....no one ever stooped to such things before.

He slammed his fist on the table, Polly jumping from the bang.

"I'm sorry."

Zander said softly walking over to the couch, petting her on the head to calm her down,

"I didn't mean to scare you."

Sitting down beside Polly, letting her curl up in his lap he continued dwelling on the murder.

An innocent family tortured and killed....why?

Why would someone be so horrible and what did they gain

from it?

Of course sitting there going over it all did no one any good, least of all himself.

"You should've stayed."

Zander scolded himself.

"You could've helped."

Going back now was an option but he shook his head. Better to let the police do it, he'd go into the church and see what could be done there.

Kea waved several sheets of paper in his face as he came through the door.

"Guess what these are."

She said brightly, standing triumphant.

"What?"

"My assignment, its finished!"

"Good job."

He meant it, but his tone left her frowning.

"What's wrong?"

He glanced out the window watching people pass.

She didn't know.

Should he tell her?

Pulling out his chair Zander slid in, mind a mess of thoughts and questions.

"Zane?"

"Its nothing. I just didn't sleep well."

"You? You never sleep 'well' by normal definitions of the term,"

Kea joked,

"You're a natural night owl. Born and bred to defy the natural order of sleep."

"Its different."

He said, not elaborating.

"Different he says."

Kea placed her college work on her desk and went into the back, coming out seconds later with a cup of milk

"Take a few hours to sleep. I don't mind picking up the extra load."

She thrust the milk at him,

"This should help."

He took the cup and sat it down, watching the ripples run across the white surface.

"Drink."

"I'm not sleepy Kea."

"Then what is it?"

Figuring she'd just find out anyway, he caved.

"The Gnome family I was supposed to see today was murdered last night. They found their bodies this morning."

"My God."

She gasped. It was lucky she wasn't holding the cup, her hands flying to her face, eyes showing genuine horror.

"How?"

".....Tortured."

Zander didn't meet Kea's gaze, already feeling his own emotional turmoil. He didn't need hers to swamp him too.

"I'm so sorry Zane. I know....I know how much you wanted to help them."

"This place..."

He clenched his fist.

"Its a cesspool."

"The church does its best."

"Maybe that's not good enough."

He thought about it all the way over to the church. They did not do enough. True, they helped whom they could, but given the little resources they could draw from it didn't do much good in the grand scheme of things.

It was a losing battle on all fronts and the massacre of the Gnome family made Zander come to accept how useless it all was.

Not the Gods themselves, but the church. It did little good and prided itself on it, while criminals roamed free, killing and terrorizing innocent people in the Ghetto and elsewhere.

"Its pointless."

"Zane---"

"No."

He stood up, waving off her protests,

"Our duty is to help people, make their lives better. That's what we swore when I took the oath to Kelante. But all we do is clean the wound, not heal it. It keeps repeatedly getting infected."

"What else can we do?"

He looked at her. He asked himself the same question, what else can he do besides what he's doing now?

Then he decided.

"Find the person who did this to the family, and kill them."

"Zane!"

Kea gripped him by the shoulder, covering his mouth with a hand so suddenly he barely registered her moving towards him.

"What're you saying? If anyone hears you---"

He took her hand away forcefully,

"I've made my decision."

"You're mad, I understand that I---"

"No!"

He stepped back shaking his head.

"I'm tired. Tired of the pain and anguish people inflict on one another. Tired of how they hate and disrespect each other for no other reason than that they can. It has to end. Someone needs to start fighting back against it."

Before Kea could say more Zander left the church, walking

back home to grab his regular clothes, he already had things planned out.

Before he got off the street, however, Kea came from behind, gripping his arm.

"Zane please."

He figured she do this, so he switched back to being cool headed.

"Don't worry. I won't do anything. I was just blowing off steam. I'm going home to rest."

"You should. I'm here if you need me."

Zane nodded and touched her hand briefly before walking on, heading home to change clothes then get down to the business at hand.

He'd go into the Ghetto, use his Magic to track the murderer however long it took, and then execute them.

"You gonna stuff your face all night? My Gods."

Kyden watched V chew on chicken leg after chicken leg, shoveling in mashed potatoes covered in gravy afterwards, and washing it down with a tall glass of rum.

Needless to say their tavern tab was expensive.

"Ohhh come on!"

Vividian, clearly smashed, chuckled holding up his drink,

"We've just got into town. Lets live a bit before we go adventuring."

"Its called working."

"Yes, yesss."

V waved away Kyden's concern,

"We'll be working soon."

"You're too loaded to even stand you dolt, let alone work."

Around them the tavern was silent, most of the customers a somber crowd, preferring quiet drinks to rambunctious partying.

V was the exception, much to Kyden's embarrassment. He wanted to 'party' in his own way, which involved draining the tavern of alcohol and food, eating as much as he could handle.

"I can do my job."

Vividian said chewing the last bit of chicken meat.

"Work what? The cold side of a pillow?"

"My. You are a grumpy person ain't you? Lorkin shoulda taught you some manners."

"He tried. Didn't take."

Kyden rolled his eyes, pushing what was left of his carrots and potatos around with a fork.

They left Sentinel almost a year ago, leaving to continue Lorkin's research into Magics big and small.

They came to Kelante City, as the locals called it, to hunt rare Kobolds known as Bjalmar, all white save their legs which were coal black.

Bred by a lunatic Mage a thousand years ago so legend said, Lorkin's journal stated they could hold potent Magic of a kind that could, if properly concentrated, cure deadly diseases.

The problem was they were hard to kill and with V plastered the way he was Kyden knew they wouldn't be going down into the caves beneath the city any time soon.

"I can't believe you'd do this."

He said, Vividian not paying attention, left cheek covered in gravy.

"You knew what we were doing today."

Suddenly a man came crashing through the window, flying acorss tables and hitting stools and plates before hitting the bar.

Kyden jumped up, Hichimaryu and Kagamaryu in his hands, scanning the tavern for any signs of a threat.

He found none. All the people terrified.

Vividian struggled up, sword drawn sluggishly.

"What...What happened?"

He asked, burping loudly and looking stunned.

"Just stay here."

Kyden left the table and rushed over to where the man lay unmoving, his pulse faint.

"Leave him!"

A coarse voice called out.

Kyden looked out the busted window and saw a white robed priest standing on the street, eyes reddened, skin sickly pale, a once youthful face now drained of its vitality, replaced by darkness and hatred.

"Why?"

Kyden said, ignoring the haggard's priest's commands, starting to run ag----

WHAM!

He went head first into the bar, forehead smacking against

wood and stone as he dropped.

A hot blazing pain spread across his temple and forehead.

His hands were empty. Hachimaryu and Kagamaryu gone.

Kyden looked up, fighting through the pain to register his attacker.

The priest glared down at him, eyes crazed.

"Leave him be!"

He said, voice rising into a howl.

A day or so before he and V had heard of a vigilante going about the city's lower town, killing criminals and other people he deemed unworthy.

He didn't make much of it then...

Now?

"Back...Off."

Kyden managed to hiss out, feeling blood dribbling down his lower lip into his mouth, taste metallic.

"Stay down for your own good. I've no fight with you woman."

"How...Original."

Kyden rose gingerly, wiping the blood off his mouth.

"You have no fight with me? After you just nailed me and sent me flying over here? Buddy, you just signed yourself up for a big ole ass kicking."

"Kelante's Mercy guides me."

The priest cast a spell, yellowish green light wrapping itself around Kyden's legs, he couldn't move.

He looked for V, only to discover the fool had tripped as he was running to fight the priest, and hit his head off a table, out cold.

"Join your friend awhile."

The priest wiggled his fingers and suddenly a sharp coldness dug into Kyden's skin.

He screamed. Punched at the Magical knots around his legs.

Nothing worked.

Slowly he went under, the last thing he heard was the man's final cries as the priest took his life.

Chapter 3

Kyden awoke a day later with Vividian dabbing his forehead with a cloth the elderly lady who owned the tavern let him borrow.

Placed upstairs shortly after the murderous priest left, V said he'd been near death, barely breathing and going pale until just a few hours before when, for reasons he didn't understand, his health returned to normal.

"Thank the Gods you're alive."

Vividian smiled putting the cloth on the bedstand.

"You took quite the beating."

"Least I could move. You piss poor drunk."

V ran his hand through hair, looking sheepish.

"Just a minor lapse."

"You hit your head off a table."

"I tripped."

"BECAUSE YOU WERE STONE DRUNK."

Vividian flinched, glancing around the room like he was afraid someone would hear this, even though, Kyden noted, anyone there would know the truth.

"Don't strain your throat."

"I'll show you a strained throat. Ugh."

Kyden's head started throbbing, he massaged his forehead, feeling the egg sized welt in the center.

"That'll hurt for a bit,"

V said,

"Lucky for you the priest wasn't looking for more vics."

"What happened to the guy he threw through glass?"

"Stabbed him through both cheeks and slit his throat."

"And no one arrested the nut?"

"He used Magic to escape. Apparently he used spells to obscure his face to those without Magic too. He's been causing all sorts of issues for law enforcement, killing criminals and suspected criminals indiscriminately. The only good thing is he goes out of his way to ensure innocent lives don't get mixed up with his 'work.' "

"My forehead disagrees."

Vividian nodded.

"Sure, but I meant being killed. He only attacked you because you were in his way. Plus the priest had you in his grasp Ky. He could've easily snuffed you out if he wanted to. Yet here you are, still breathing and insulting your best friend."

That was true enough.

Kyden swung his legs over and planted them on the floor, getting up cautiously and stretching. He was in a white night gown, one Vividian no doubt just threw on him to cover up his 'bits'.

"Mind getting me some food?"

He asked,

"My stomach feels like a pit."

V grinned.

"I'll have Lydia send up some boiled eggs. You should rest."

"We got work to do."

"Even when you get your ass handed to you,"

Vividian teased as he was going out the door,

"You still need to work. Lorkin trained you well."

"Just bring the eggs, smartass."

"As you say master."

Kyden sat back down on the bed as V closed the door, thinking about the priest.

Someone deranged by madness usually didn't just snap for no reason. There was a cause.

What was it?

Zander washed off his knife, running the blade under hot water, letting both the metal and his hand feel the sharp sting of it.

He groaned but didn't pull away, believing pain was what kept his senses clear.

Once his skin was red and blade clean he turned the tap off and wrapped cloth around it to dry it, contemplating his next move as he did so.

Killing Jaren Corbet ended the drug syndicate in Kelante city, at least for the foreseeable future. The man had countless lives on his hands.

He'd take a bit to rest and research new targets before making his next assassination plans, giving him time to restock on supplies and attend to his church duties.

Opening a drawer next to his bed Zander dropped the knife in and shut it, glancing at Polly sleeping on his pillow.

"You're lucky."

He said softly,

"Blissful and happy, unaware of what's happening in the

world. An innocent ignorance I envy you for."

He laid down beside her and gently stroked her ears, listening to her purr.

Kea would want him to help with another assignment she was dealing with, an essay on Demonology if he remembered correctly.

In all honesty he wanted to tell her to stop wasting her time at those classes, to abandon them and start working with him on the streets taking down criminals doing harm to the people they ministered too, but he knew doing so meant exposing what he did in the shadows, something he wasn't ready for, and something he'd already promised her he wouldn't do.

So, for now, Zander played the role of dutiful priest, servant of the Gods, or more accurately, a servant to the organization that CLAIMED to represent Divine Will on earth.

In actuality it just represented human interests masked as the will of the Gods, sucking the pocket books of its believers dry, giving piss poor advice and comfort in return.

His faith in the Gods hadn't waivered. On the contrary, he trusted in them more than he did any mortal being, but they weren't guiding the Church, not anymore at least.

It was up to him to do their will by slaying those who harmed their children.

He was only getting started in his new Calling.

Stroking Polly's back Zander wondered about Kea, what she would think once she knew the truth about what he did.

More importantly, he mused, how would she react?

Naturally, he wasn't expecting her to jump for joy or call him a hero. He anticipated her revulsion, but he hoped that's as far as it went, that she understood WHY he was doing what he was doing and wouldn't interfere or contact authorities.

Should she do so, he was fully prepared to kill her as well, or anyone for that matter.

His mission was Sacred. Gods sanctioned.

No one had the right to deny him his kills, to deny the victims justice.

This thought brought back the woman in the Tavern, how she sprang to the defense of the scum he was hunting.

He didn't fault her. She had no idea who the man was judging by her accent. She wasn't a local. That being the case, he let her live.

If she interfered again, it would be a different story.

Bjalmar, like all Kobolds, lived underground, and the closest

mine was located south of Kelante City in the small Coal town of Norwatch.

Getting directions from a street vendor Vividian and Kyden saddled up and rode out as soon as Kyden was feeling better, arriving in the village just after lunch, greeted by cautious stares by the villagers.

Isolated villages were always on edge when strangers visited, though Norwatch's people seemed a bit more cautious than normal, shutting their downs and locking their doors almost immediately after spotting the two.

"Strange."

Kyden said as he and V rode through the village's main street, noting every shop, opened minutes before, now had CLOSED signs on the doors.

"Maybe they saw your perma-scowl and decided not to risk it?"

"Shut up."

"Just saying man, sometimes you're a scary fella."

"Scary fella?"

"Scary fella."

Kyden looked at Vividian,

"You sure you didn't dip into the liquor before we left Kelante?"

"Perish the thought."

Returning his focus on the job at hand Kyden decided to approach the village elder for information, knowing no one else was likely to even answer the door for them.

The Norwatch elder's house, so Kyden deduced, was close to the general store in the middle of town, a 'chubby' building, short and compact.

Comfy in its own way.

Slipping off his horse Kyden gave the door two knocks.

"Who is it?"

A voice, soft in tone, asked behind it.

"My name is Kyden Mareus. My friend and I are Collectors. We've come to ask you a few questions about the coal mine."

"Go away!"

The sharp reply surprised him. He stared at the door for a moment unsure what to say next.

"Why?"

"There's nothing here for the likes of you! Go now!"

"We've come a long way. Please, we won't take up much of your time."

No answer came back.

Frustrated but knowing when not to push buttons, Kyden remounted, gesturing to V.

"We're going to have to go in blind."

"What?"

"Its the only option. Its too important not to."

"We should return to Kelante and see if anyone there knows anything,"

"No time for that."

Kyden turned and galloped towards the mine.

Vividian called to the Gods, asking why he was shackled to such an impulsive and dimwitted friend.

"Because I'm prettier than you."

Came Kyden's answer.

"That you are."

V chuckled, following him.

The mines, stones a cold bluish colour, gave off an eerie feeling. It didn't help matters that small animal bones were left outside the mine shaft's mouth.

"Goblins."

Kyden noted going in.

"Sometimes they like to drop the bones of their kills outside, saves their home from getting cluttered with muck."

"Why do you even know that?"

Vividian asked, drawing his sword immediately upon entering, not willing to take any risks.

"Interest. Monster habits were sort of my thing as a kid."

"You were fascinated by Goblin eating habits?"

"Goblin eating habits. Kobold living conditions. Griffin flight patterns, you name it. It beat listening to Lorkin drone on about the latest in potion mixing."

Kyden smiled at the memory of the old man. The hurt that came with the memory worth it.

The shafts twisted and turned, as if carved haphazardly and not with a purpose, leaving the two to blunder about without much sense of direction.

Bjalmar lived deep in the caves, usually either Chieftains or

War Chiefs of Kobold Clans. Merciless ones too from everything Kyden heard and studied, they delighted in taking captives to torture or sacrifice to their Dark Gods.

The only Kobold God known by name to scholars was Tuwal, the God of Death and Shades. Dressed in black robes and carrying a scythe, Tuwal was Reaper and King of Souls according to Kobold mythology.

Goblin religion was even more obscure. No one knew the names of the deities they worshiped, how their Shamans developed their Magical power, or even what rituals they practiced besides the occasional human or animal sacrifice.

Kyden thought of the latter as he led Vividian through a particularly narrow section of the mine, walls so close together they needed to squeeze through carefully.

Lorkin mentioned an expedition he had been a part of in his younger days that ventured into the Sallcar Cave in the East, reputed to be the birthplace of the Goblin species, in the hopes they could discover more on Goblin spirituality.

What Goblins they did find weren't much willing to let a bunch of human Mages study their religion. Instead, as Kyden assumed right away before the old man even began telling the story, they attacked.

One member of the party was wounded bad enough that his

leg needed to be amputated later, but luckily no one died save two Goblins. After that, Lorkin said, he never wanted to be near them again.

Now here Kyden was, going deep underground to continue research the old man abandoned.

"He'd probably call me an idiot."

Kyden said to himself out loud with a smile.

"What're you talking about?"

Vividian asked, scanning the rocks ahead.

"Nothing. Just thinking about Lorkin."

They came across an underground pond in one corner of the mine, water still fresh enough to drink from.

V dunked their two containers in while Kyden stayed alert for any signs of danger.

"How much longer do you think it will take to find a Bjalmar?"

"Its unpredictable with these types of Kobolds. Sometimes they're out in the open. Other times they're in a pocket of the caves sleeping."

He handed Kyden back his container and sighed, scratching his head.

"Why does it feel like we'll be down here going 'round and

around until we bump into one?"

"Because you know me and know that's exactly what I intend to do?"

"Rigggght. Maybe I shoulda stayed back in that tavern. At least there I'd be able to drink in peace."

"And get your face messy with gravy."

"It was one time! C'mon!"

"Sssh dummy. Something might hear you."

With their water filled the two continued their hunt, and luckily for an impatient V they stumbled upon a 'nest' of Kobolds soon afterward.

In the middle of which was a Bjalmar, golden eyes focused on a dish of cooked rabbit.

Four other 'lesser' Kobolds sat around the Bjalmar already digging into their meal.

In the far corner of the 'pocket' Vividian caught sight of something and tugged on Kyden's sleeve and pointed it out.

"An Elven boy."

Kyden whispered, noting his wrists and feet were bound together.

"An intended sacrificial victim."

"Not anymore."

V started forward but Kyden held him back.

"Wait. Bjalmar are dangerous. You can't just rush in, you'd get slaughtered. AND put the boy at risk."

"Then what? We just hope they don't kill him?"

Kyden didn't bother replying.

Instead he used his Magic.

In the year since Lorkin's death he learned several spells beyond his initial skillset, becoming adept at fire and Ice Magic.

He used fire Magic here, targeting the lesser Kobolds and holding up his hand.

"Consume."

He said.

And orangish red flames exploded from their chests in sudden fury, swallowing them up almost instantly, as quick a death as he could give them.

The Bjalmar, caught off guard by this attack, threw down its venison and jumped to its feet, eyes darting everywhere to find its enemies, finally settling on V and Kyden once it looked up.

It barred its fangs, sharp and, rather surprisingly, pure white.

"I hope you can handle this,"

Vividian said taking his first steps toward the thing,

"I don't wanna have to babysit your ass."

"Please, like an old man can babysit me."

And with that Kyden flew down into the pocket, daggers out, spinning with beautifully executed slashes and strikes, moving with such speed even V had trouble keeping up.

It made him wonder how that vigilante got the better of Kyden at the tavern, he moved so effortlessly and fluidly, combining his Magic with his natural ability for fighting.

The Bjalmar, as good as Kyden warned, was equally capable at fighting, quickly blocking the Mage's blows, knocking him back with ease.

"Humans....Not belong here."

The thing growled, shocking Vividian.

Kyden was unfazed.

"But Kobolds can just saunter up top huh?"

Kyden held Hichimaryu and Kagamaryu defensively,

"Sounds reasonable."

"Humans not belong here!"

The Bjalmar lunged, its weapon, an axe, crashing down with a powerful blow, sending up dust.

Kyden evaded it, daggers coming up under the axe and driving into the beast's left side, hitting flesh.

With a shrill cry the Bjalmar fell back, a furred hand clutching at its new wound, breathing heavily.

"HUMANS NOT BELO----ARGGH!"

Kyden's dagger sank deep into the Bjalmar's throat. He punctured its skin over and over, until finally he broke through enough to deliver a clean cut across it, severing its jugular vein.

Blood gushed over his hands and splashed onto his face, the Kobold's eyes searching for a way out, realizing all too late there was nothing it could do.

It collapsed, struggling to breathe a minute more, then going still.

Like he just finished cutting dinner Kyden flicked the blood from his twin daggers and sheathed them, wiping some from his cheek before turning to the boy.

"You just gonna stand there."

Kyden said back to Vividian, who stood staring at the dead Kobold.

"Help the kid. I'll start skinning the Bjalmar."

"H..How did you do that? That was AWESOME! You were like a ninja from those old stories!"

"Yeah, yeah. Don't fall in love with me. Help the kid."

Vividan did, cutting the bindings of the Elf and waking him up, the boy understandably frightened.

"Hey, hey, its OK. We won't hurt you, we're here to help."

"Who are you?"

The boy asked, nervous.

"I'm Vividian Cassender, and this is my best friend, Kyden Mareus. He's a bit weird but he grows on ya."

The boy didn't say anything. He just stared at the bodies of the Kobolds.

Once Kyden finished collecting samples the three of them made it out of the Norwatch mines, and were met by a mob of angry villagers.

The village elder, a square shaped man with bulky arms and one blue eye, stepped forward, a rusted sword in his left

hand.

"You had no right."

He said, voice uneven, almost as if it didn't belong in his body.

"The Bjalmar protected us."

"Huh?"

Vividian glanced at Kyden, not understanding.

"You made a contract with a Kobold?"

Kyden, who had his arm wrapped around the Elven boy's shoulder, asked in disgust.

"He protected Norwatch."

The elder shot back, obviously taking offense at being judged by this random adventurer.

"You sacrificed innocent people to that beast? You were going sacrifice THIS BOY to it?"

Kyden gestured for Vividian to take the boy and drew Hichimaryu, pointing it at the elder.

"Maybe I should sacrifice you to the Goblins still in the mines? Would you like that?"

"You're a fool."

"Did you all know?"

He scanned the faces of the mob, their eyes showing their guilt, none were innocent in this crime.

"Gods forgive me."

"Kyden, wait!"

Vividian's shout didn't stop him, Kyden's blade running across the elder's throat, then he went through a man and a woman in a blink of an eye.

Hichimaryu shone in the sunlight, glinting as blood flew into the air in streaks, drenching Kyden and those he killed in a red mess.

Once he finished he didn't bother looking at V, he continued to their horses and mounted, waiting for them to join him.

When they did Kyden placed the boy up into his saddle, placing him in front.

"We'll get you home. Where are you from?"

The boy whispered Kelante city, his voice hoarse.

"Kelante city? How did you get all the way out here?"

"Sold."

Is all the boy said.

Kyden shared a concerned look with V.

Trafficking wasn't unheard of, but it certainly wasn't common, or at least the two hadn't heard much about it.

"Are your parents in Kelante?"

The boy nodded.

"We'll take you back to them, just show us the way."

Kyden could feel Vividian's eyes on him, questioning what he just saw.

He'd explain, but not right now.

A part of him wondered if he did the right thing, killing those who killed so many by sacrificing them to the Kobold. And what if they had children of their own?

He acted on anger and impulse, but was it unjustified? Murdering those who murdered others for their own selfish gain?

Kyden swallowed and turned his horse around, what's done is done, he told himself, only the Gods will judge him now.

Chapter 4

Kea watched him file paperwork into a folder and shove it into a desk drawer, her gaze an uneasy one, which made him feel uneasy in turn.

She hadn't said much when he entered the office that morning, offering a brief 'good morning' before focusing on the work in front of her.

Zander didn't think much of it at first, mind elsewhere, but when he noticed she kept glancing up at him from time to time he started to get suspicious.

Could she know?

He found it unlikely given Kea's Magic was insufficient and therefore seeing past his own wasn't at all possible, but he kept his guard up regardless.

"Have any plans later?"

He asked casually.

"N..No."

She said quickly.

"Want to go out with me?"

At first he could tell she was going to decline, her hand gestures, fidgety, said it all, but she nodded.

"Where to?"

"I thought I'd cook you dinner? Discuss your current classes?"

"S...Sure."

"Great. Let's finish up and we'll head out."

He wrapped up his paperwork and waited by the office door while Kea finished hers, noticing she went slower than usual, which made him worry.

When she was done they left the office and walked down the street towards his home, swapping casual chit chat as they went.

Kea brought up that one of her professors, Dr. Urqhart, was suspected of having an affair with the inspector of Medicine at the hospital.

Zane politely nodded and commented here and there to the bits of rumour and gossip he actually caught, pretending to care.

Dr. Urqhart, an old churchman, was known to be quite interested in the opposite sex, so it wasn't surprising to hear he was caught slipping his 'bits' in places they didn't belong.

The inspector of Medicine, Adeline Broll, was also known to him, if more distantly.

An accomplished physician in her own right, she was offered the office of inspector by the city council and gladly accepted,

performing well.

But even the best of people, Zander grinned, fell into immoral behavior if presented a ripe opportunity without fear of punishment.

Sadly for Urqhart and Broll, they were found out and now risked their careers being destroyed.

"Some people just can't stay faithful to one spouse."

Zander said finally as he and Kea crossed the street,

"Either through boredom, lust, or plain curiosity, they find themselves in another's bed. Some feel genuine remorse and change. Others slip farther into the cesspool of adultery and disappear."

"Have you ever dealt with a couple like that?"

"Once, a few years ago now. The wife, growing tired of her husband's lack of interest in....shall we say, nights together, sought another lover."

Reaching Zane's home he pulled out his keys and slipped them into the lock.

"Of course, her husband found out about it four months later and almost killed them both. Then the Judge sent them to me."

Going inside, Zander offered to get Kea some water, which she declined and took a seat at his table, Polly quickly making a beeline over to her for a belly rub.

The priest turned on the tap and got himself a drink, then continued his story.

"The wife begged her husband to take her back during our counseling sessions, explaining why she felt the way she did. The husband refused, telling her he loved her, wanted no one but her, but just couldn't take her back, understandably."

"Did he say why he stopped being intimate with her?"

"Yes. Apparently he grew tired of sex in general. Saw it as pointless given that, at least for him, it was just moments of pleasure that disappeared as fast it came...no pun intended."

Kea didn't laugh, unusual for her.

He knew something was off now.

"In the end,"

Zander wrapped up,

"He left her and is now living quietly out in the countryside last I heard. The wife is married again to a merchant in some city up north."

Kea smiled faintly and asked what he was serving for dinner.

"How does chicken breast and potatoes sound?"

"Delicious."

This time he knew her answer was genuine.

"You killed the whole town!"

"Will you shut your mouth!"

Kyden pressed his hand hard against V's face, the older man glaring at him in return.

"I did what I did."

They walked down one of Kelante's many streets after having dropped the Elven boy off home to his parents.

"You killed---"

"Vividian, don't announce the damn thing OK? People have ears you dumbass."

Luckily for them there weren't many people about on this particular street, the sole exception being a homeless woman who seemed more interested in her own reality than what they were arguing about.

"You didn't need to do it."

Vividian said.

"And what?"

Kyden asked,

"Just let them skewer us and feed the boy to the Kobolds? I did what was right."

V tried protesting again but Kyden waved it off, tired of fighting over a past event. He was already conflicted enough in his heart, he didn't need V making him feel worse.

Making his way down the street he saw the tip of the church of Kelante rising in the distance, a beautiful reminder of the city's namesake.

"Been awhile since I been in a church."

Kyden said softly, not even being able to recall the last time he had been in one.

Lorkin taught him about the Gods, their stories and their functions, but beyond that there wasn't much religious training.

He believed, prayed once and awhile, usually for strength in battle or in doing a hard task, but he wasn't much one for rituals or singing hymns.

"STOP ZANE!"

The woman's voice, sharp and shrill, cut through Kyden,

stopping his stride and made him turn to the left where a house was all lit up.

He saw a woman's form, Elven by the ears, silhouetted in the candle light in the window.

"V,"

Kyden gestured for him and then pointed at the house,

"Look."

"ZANE!"

The door flew open, the woman rushing out in a scramble for safety, clothes shredded.

Following her was the same priest Kyden met at the tavern, long knife in hand.

"Motherfucker."

Vividian muttered.

"This time we take him together."

Kyden said looking back at V,

"You aren't drunk this time, so don't let me down."

"Even in a life or death moment you gotta insult me geesh."

"Only out of love."

Kyden drew his daggers as the priest spotted them, his eyes growing larger like he found his true targets.

"V, protect the girl. He's mine."

"Uh, you didn't fair so well last time."

Kyden smirked and cast an ice spell over Hichimaryu and Kagamaryu, lengthening the reach of their blades.

"I was unprepared that time. I won't lose now."

"So confident. You foolish woman."

The priest laughed.

"I'll give you one chance. Hand over the Dark Elf and we all go home safe."

"Did you not just see me put an enchantment on my daggers?"

Kyden held them up.

"Too late for that mate."

The priest's hands weaved two black spear points into existence, Magic stronger than before, materializing weapons was beyond most Mages, even experienced ones like Lorkin.

Which meant, Kyden assumed, he offered up his soul to a God in order to secure a pact, allowing him to draw on that God's power in return for being that God's eternal servant in the

afterlife.

"You disgust me,"

The priest growled, voice becoming animalistic,

"Defending the criminals. The corrupters. Those who plag---"

Kyden attacked, using the man's rant to his advantage, daggers cutting diagonally and across in rapid motions.

The priest leapt back, his index finger drawn back to slow and severed in a burst of blood.

He hissed back the pain and smashed his spears into the ground, cracking the cement, black spikes darting out in a patterned attack towards Kyden.

"Dammit."

The Mage's jump barely saved his leg from impalement, the spikes continuing to sprout up, the priest stabbing down to create more.

"Ky, let me---"

"Stay with the woman!"

Hitting the ground he leapt over one of the spikes, landing on the other side of it and rolling to avoid another. He kept moving, leaping and hopping, to evade the priest's Magic.

Getting close wasn't an option at this point, trying would end

up getting him killed.

So, he used his Magic like he did against Mordrent.

Summoning all of his power Kyden focused on the priest' home behind him, on the door specifically.

With a hand he latched onto it and pulled, snapping the hinges and hurling it at the priest, who, caught off guard, failed to react in time.

The door creaming his face perfectly, flipping him backwards on his head.

Having the opening he needed Kyden raced towards the fallen cleric, Hichimaryu and Kagamaryu ready.

He slammed both down into the man's back, blades biting into the flesh, into his heart.

But he didn't cry out.

Didn't even flinch.

He was already dead.

"Taken out by a door."

Kyden heard V say.

"Now that's something an obituary should note."

Pulling out his daggers he checked the priest's pulse just to

make sure he was truly dead, getting nothing.

"My life is over. But my existence is not!"

"OUGH!"

Kyden spun on his heels, watching the Dark Elf gripping Vividian by the throat, lifting him up into the air like he was a ragdoll.

"V!"

The Dark Elf threw him into the now doorless house, he disappeared inside without a sound.

"You bastard."

"Your friend should've been better prepared."

The woman said, stepping closer, looking her arms and legs over,

"Its a different suit, but I'm sure I'll grow into it."

"You possessed her."

"My, aren't you a dense one. Yes. My work is not over."

Kyden started for her, his body beginning to tire.

The Dark Elf reached out and by the priest's spirit's Magic gripped his shoulder and brought him to the ground, forcing his face to strike the cement street.

"Do you not see? My divine mission will continue for as long as I draw breath. It does not need to be my actual body."

Kyden couldn't move, pinned down by an overwhelming Magical power.

"Its a pity really,"

The Dark Elf walked over to him,

"All you needed to do was stay out of the way. I was fully willing to let you live. But, everyone wants to be a hero."

"Ironic...Coming from you."

"Yes. I suppose it is."

She stomped on the center of his back.

Kyden cried out, a wave of pain crippling him.

Again her boot came down, this time near his neck. He coughed and gagged, fighting for breath.

Pushing him over with a foot the Dark Elf stared down at him, a gloating smile on her face.

She drilled his chin, busting the skin.

Kyden reached for Hichimaryu, stopped by a foot crushing his hand underneath its weight.

She looked up and Kyden followed her glance to the priest's

house, Vividian standing there.

"Wait your turn."

She gestured with a hand and threw V towards her---

What she wasn't counting on was him wanting that.

His sword was ready and as he flew towards her, acting helpless to better play the hapless victim, he straightened out suddenly and brandished it, in one hard cut he chopped into her neck, head rolling.

Vividian collided with the body and quickly bounded back up, helping Kyden to his feet.

Though badly beaten and fighting to keep conscious the Mage started chanting an old exorcist spell Lorkin taught him, one which settled the souls of the dead and locked them out of possessing another vessel.

They heard the priest's disembodied screeches as the chant worked its way throughout his soul, chaining him to the afterlife realm forever, even barring him from reincarnating.

When it was finished, Kyden collapsed.

V caught him in time.

"You gonna be OK?"

He asked, checking his friend over.

"Yeah. Just got the shit kicked out of me."

"You certainly did."

"At least I didn't get thrown through a house."

"Wow. Nice way to thank a man who saved your life."

Kyden laughed softly, tapping V's cheek.

"And who did the exorcism spell? Oh right, me. Try again next time champ, you'll get there."

"Brat."

"Sure."

Vividian helped Ky to his feet and let him put his weight on his shoulders as they walked to the tavern.

"You hungry?"

V asked.

"Hungry? You're always hungry. I just wanna rest."

"You did get your ass kicked. So I suppose you can."

The two laughed, both agreeing to split the bill.